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ABSTRACT

This address presents recent developments in the Florida movement toward entry and exit examinations in higher education. During the 1970s, parents, business leaders and state government leaders had expressed concern that students from Florida's schools, colleges, and universities were not demonstrating sufficient quality in job performance, graduation rates, standardized test scores and other indicators. As the state focused upon public school performance first, pressure was exerted to develop secondary school exit evaluations, the Student Assessment Test. The Florida Legislature pushed for statutory requirements on two fronts in higher education: (1) an assessment tool for the end of sophomore year, now known as College Level Academic Skills Test (CLAST); and (2) minimum standards for admission to teacher education programs at the junior year, with criteria developed for freshman admissions to the State University System. Laws have been set in place to protect institutions of higher education from loss of funding due to enrollment loss. Institutions have concentrated more energy and resources on core curriculum, strengthened advisement for entering students, and renewed existing focus on writing and math lab experiences. The biggest policy issue is the differential impact upon minority youth. For evaluative instruments to be used constructively, higher education faculty need exposure, instruction, and reinforcement in evaluation. (LMO)

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WHY IT OCCURRED: THE POLITICAL AND EDUCATIONAL CLIMATE IN FLORIDA

By Roy E. McTarnaghan

In researching high school graduation requirements and higher education admissions requirements during 1980, a year in which the State University System of Florida was strengthening its admissions criteria, some interesting facts surfaced:

1. Graduation from high school in Kansas in 1908 required: Final Exam:

   In math--solving a square root and a cube root problem--longhand;

   In biology--explain completely the digestive process;

   In social studies--analyze the Kansas-Nebraska Act;

   In English--write a poem while the test supervisor stood by and evaluated you on penmanship.

2. States that had explicit core course requirements as late as 1960 or 1965, had given up much of that oversight to local districts by 1970. Nationwide movements of several types in the 1960's had pushed for

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a wider band of electives, reduced core course requirements and tended to lower minimum standards.

3. Studies by the Regents of the University of California and by the Regents in Florida both confirmed that a significant erosion had occurred in the proportion of students entering a university with courses in math, science and writing experiences between 1970 and 1980. In each case, the respective Boards moved to set core course requirements in place for university applicants, hoping to change behavior in the secondary schools.

In Florida, the admissions rule adopted by the Board of Regents in 1981 for university admission appeared in slightly altered form in 1983 as the RAISE bill, adopted by the Florida Legislature for high school graduation in 1987, providing for a four-year phase-in.

During the 1970's, parents, business leaders and state government leaders had expressed concern that students from Florida's schools, colleges and universities were not demonstrating sufficient quality in job performance, graduation rates, standardized test scores and other indicators.

As the state focused upon public school performance first, pressure was exerted to develop secondary school exit

evaluations which came to be known as the "Functional Literacy Test"--given that most observers believed the achievement level was substantially below that of 12th grade. After litigation and delay, that program was put in place and renamed the "Student Assessment Test."

Quickly on the heels of that effort, the Florida Legislature pushed for statutory requirements on two fronts in higher education:

1. Requiring the development of an assessment tool for end of sophomore year in both universities and community colleges--now known as CLAST--"College Level Academic Skills Test."

2. Requiring minimum standards for admission to teacher education programs at the junior year in the State University System, as well as requiring a post-baccalaureate, pre-certification exam prior to teaching.

During the hearings on these bills, later to become law, a consistent theme seemed to echo through long series of legislative inquiry:

a. minimum standards have been eroded at all levels of education;

b. no longer are "core requirements" thought so essential in general education, uniformly taught and required in higher education;

c. employers complain about how much "in-service" education is needed for persons with degrees--not in the skill area unique to the job, but rather, in communication and computation skills believed essential for all educated persons;

d. teachers in the public schools, in letter writing to legislative and executive offices supporting salary increases or other education policy issues, frequently were found to have demonstrated spelling and language usage errors;

e. college of education students, as a group, usually had the lowest entrance exam scores among all college groups, yet the highest achieved grade point average upon graduation.

In attempting to reach out and put some explicit standard into law, the Florida Legislature adopted a standard for admission to a teaching program at the junior year level with criteria developed for freshman admissions to the State University System--scoring at the 40th percentile for college-bound seniors on one of two nationally normed freshman

admissions tests. That score level, combined with a 2.0, or "C," grade point average from high school, had represented the point where a 50-50 chance of success could be predicted for the first year in college. Significantly, as this law was implemented, large numbers of students were eliminated from teacher education programs at the junior year of college.

The CLAST development, on the other hand, threw out to the Community College and University faculty in Computation and Communication the challenge to develop some assessment representing acceptable skill levels by end of college sophomore year. Faculty groups were formed, goals established, criteria and skill areas identified, test items constructed to measure those skills, etc. The goals appeared to be moving toward competency assessment. Applications of the test instruments to the real population, however, brought forth normative scales and cut-off points were established significantly below the alleged competency levels.

As one who gave testimony before both House and Senate Committees on these two bills, and having conducted the validity study on the SUS admissions standards in 1980-81, I did share information with the Legislature that there was less grade inflation apparent in those disciplines where external validation was present. Examples occur in professional field areas where licensing exams tend to create a different student-professor attitude toward evaluation.

Did the Florida movement toward entry and exit examinations come from higher education? Not very much, if at all. In deference to the Community College System, exams have been more widely used for placement and guidance over many years than in the typical university. However, the "culture" in higher education in Florida, indeed as in most of the U.S., was pointed toward access and appeared to lose focus on standards. The Florida Legislature clearly has proclaimed as state policy that admission to a Community College is "open access" with support for remediation, while admission to a state university, as a freshman, is "limited access," yet with an articulation agreement accepting all A.A. degree earners into the university system at the junior level.

Philosophically, the state has confirmed its position for open door at the front end and reasonable standards of progress in the middle, with exit criteria that demonstrate reasonable skill levels. The public is solidly behind this concept. Faculty are generally behind this concept. Occasionally, administrators are very concerned as enrollment loss is predicted and the tie to budget support is all too clear.

More recently, legislative pressure to implement entry level tests has resulted in four off-the-shelf exams used

ostensibly for placement. The concept, of course, is consistent with good theory and practice--"Find out where a student is in skill level, place them at the appropriate level, then adequate and supportive teaching and learning can take place." In practice, many in higher education view these instruments as achievement tests, not designed for placement, and question their appropriateness.

Clearly, the state has moved toward specification of objectives, establishment of assessment practices, and a focus on quality control. The movement occurred at the legislative level because lawmakers perceived higher education persons being more concerned with numbers of students enrolled than with achievement. Never mind that a few years earlier, many of those same legislators had led the fight for "open access," greater elective flexibility, and the like. Like so often in our history, community interests are expressed politically, then laws are passed to support those interests. When the pendulum swings too far one way, the process reverses itself. Thus, in this era legislative bodies can and do respond quicker to citizen concerns than does a college or university, where decisions and change come slowly due to the elaborate process required for curriculum or standards modification.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT

In the interplay between higher education institutions and the legislature over potential "loss of funding" due to quality control, laws have been set in place to protect state funding due to enrollment loss. We call this process "corridor funding," where "no loss" is supported within five percent of the enrollment plan on the downside.

Institutions have concentrated more energy and resources on core curriculum, reduction of class size--especially in math and English, strengthened advisement for entering students and renewed existing focus on writing and math lab (non-credit) experiences. In fact, lay Board members have been more vocal in calling for strengthening undergraduate education than faculty and administrative staff.

In support of this effort, there have been target funds appropriated by the Legislature both to Community Colleges and Universities for undergraduate enhancement, including reduction of class size. Monitoring and feedback systems have been put in place to provide institutional and state boards information on progress.

Viewed from a statewide perspective, our analysis of the preparation level of high school graduates has changed

dramatically in the past two years. In 1983, approximately 7-1/2 percent of all Florida high school seniors appeared to have met the course requirements required by law for 1987 entrance to a State university. By 1985, that figure had jumped to more than 25 percent. The pressure on the secondary schools for staffing changes, particularly in light of level enrollments in many districts, is very heavy. Yet, this momentum continues. It appears that shortages of qualified faculty at the secondary level in math, science and foreign languages may inhibit the full realization of the Legislature's 1989 requirements.

Nonetheless, Florida has turned the corner and is pushing ahead toward a quality control level that to many would seem modest by 1950 standards, but appear significant to high school students today.

The biggest policy issue is the differential impact upon minority youth--particularly Black. Unless the pre-college exposure and experiences are dramatically improved for Black secondary school students, unless the retention rate is also improved, unless early counseling at the junior high level points more Black students toward a college prep program, then the present program of quality control via external assessment will be seen as discriminatory, in that the outcome will be fewer minority students admitted, retained

and graduated from postsecondary institutions. Our failure not only to recognize this issue, but also resolve it, will mean a quick retreat from reasonable standards. We are hopeful and optimistic that access and quality can and should go hand in hand. For this to occur, a strengthened partnership must develop among the sectors and levels of education, with staff and leadership seeing all education on a continuum.

Critics of the Florida assessment movement (and they are many) see the use of tests as restrictive and punitive. Those who see fewer minority students moving through the system attribute smaller numbers to misuse of testing and the frightening experience caused to some students.

Others would describe testing as like gasoline, which is good to run a car, but bad to drink. In the use of evaluative instruments, a skilled faculty member can find out where a student is in a subject field, properly place and guide that student, provide constructive feedback and help the student and society know whether reasonable goals for the learning experience have been achieved.

For this latter view to become a reality, all our higher education faculty need exposure, instruction and reinforcement in the art and science of evaluation. How many

of our present faculty know how to clearly define learning objectives, construct test items, do item analysis, evaluate essay responses? The truth is that probably fewer than 10 percent of college and university faculty have been exposed to understanding the teaching-learning process, and even an orientation to measurement and evaluation as part of a graduate program. The Ph.D. program points toward research and various types of research methodology are explored. The majority of Ph.D. graduates have traditionally entered higher education, and studies of cost analysis and percent of effort among faculty show that instruction may account, on the average, from 50 to 90 percent of effort, while research may amount for 5 to 30 percent of effort. The balance of effort. among full-time staff, is split among public service, advisement and academic administration.

Yet, with the majority of effort and assignment on instruction, little is done to systematically provide future college and university faculty understanding and skills to assist in teaching and evaluation.

Thirty years ago this Fall, I was fortunate to have a supportive experience in this area as a graduate teaching assistant at Ohio State University. Many years earlier, under the leadership of Ralph Tyler, Ohio State instituted a broad-based Office of Evaluation Services. Departments were encouraged and assisted in developing end of course

"challenge exams." Teaching Assistants were provided non-credit experiences in teaching, required observation of other faculty teaching, periodic observation and evaluation of one's own instruction, test construction--including item analysis, standard score identification, etc., and use of student feedback instruments. It has served me and others well over the years. Remember, in the 1950's, Ohio State University was required by law to enroll any student from Ohio who had graduated from an Ohio high school, so the student ability range was great. As with community colleges today, colleges and universities with a diverse student population are driven, by necessity, to be conscious of and committed to understanding individual differences among students. Traditionally, selective institutions have assumed students were all bright and could figure out the subtle messages relating to teaching and learning--could accept the pressure of exams unrelated to material covered in class, and the uncertainty of seeing a final grade posted after the end of term, never knowing whether the responses given were right or wrong.

SUMMARY

We know so much about teaching and learning, yet so few practice what is known. It is no wonder that within a few years after college, most of the skills and knowledge have eroded! Yet, each of us has had learning experiences which

remain vivid many years after the event, stimulated by a creative approach, made personal by a teacher who understood us as a person and related our experience to the event, and found that some kind of reinforcement made that learning permanent. How lucky are those students to be exposed to excellent teachers! How did those special people learn how to teach and stimulate so well! That is our challenge today. To take our body of knowledge, to provide <u>leadership</u> when needed, to focus on the debilitating effects of drop-out and failure, and use evaluation mechanisms and shape them to provide both a diagnostic and support system for learning.